

CHALLENGE TO PATRIARCHAL NORMATIVITY IN MARRIAGE: THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SHUBHA MENON'S *THE SECOND COMING*

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to critically analyse Shubha Menon's *The Second Coming*. The paper seeks to show how the central character Mini makes a desperate effort to challenge the oppressive domestic environment that her husband creates for her. She has an oppressing feeling that she is one of the household chattels for her husband. Nurturing a romanticised notion of married life in her heart, she feels disillusioned and makes an effort to escape from the drudgery of married life. She tries to find fulfilment as a professional wedding planner but exploitative agents make her ultimately turn full circle and go back to her husband's home.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchal Normativity, Oxymoron, Marginality

INTRODUCTION

The novel under critical investigation is Shubha Menon's *The Second Coming*. In this novel, the central character Mini is the strong contender of the rights of individual choices if the marital life fails to provide her with love, care and romance. Mini defies the sanctity of marriage in which only the husband dictates his terms and takes his wife to be just a passive player in the dynamics of marital relationships. But she defies this ages old stereotypical image. She feels that romance in marriage is oxygen and its absence causes carcinogenic effect "Mini longed for a touch of romance but life had taught her that romance in a marriage was an oxymoron" (2). She pontificates on endless possibilities.

DISCUSSIONS

Shubha Menon in this novel has set a radical feminist stage in which "In such a gynocentric universe, female values of care, relationality, and boundary-fluidity would become the norms for a feminist social ethic" (*Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction*: 102). *The Second Coming* presents conditions where the central female protagonist Mini emerges as a new voice in Indian social milieu. Mini as a wedding planner at Soul Mates in New Delhi has come to realize that romance is an oxymoron in a marriage and newly-wedded couples soon get to know the reality about conjugal bliss.

She gives free reigns to her imagination both in her personal and professional life that makes her altogether a different type of lady. In her personal life, she can even challenge her husband's autonomy and hegemony over her body as well as over her free speech. She is the lady who wants to celebrate romance and sexuality in the institution of marriage, but if denied her right, she would plunge into some other's arms to fulfil her repressed desires. In her professional life, she is the main employee in Soul Mates Company. She plans weddings in such a way that the demand for her is ever

increasing.

She can even stake her morality because her husband does not look at her with lust. She salutes traditional values only when her husband is full of romance for her. Her Husband gives more importance to dogs and cricket matches. The century scored by Tendulkar gives her cavalier husband more pleasure than sitting in the company of his wife. Mini, unlike other traditional wives starts interrogating the institution of marriage and its norms.

The novel shows the marital life of Mini with Shyam, an insipid saga of conflict of interests where one partner wants to fill it with love and romance and the other one takes love and romance to be the infant stage of marital life and forgets it to adopt some other bigger responsibilities. Mini and Shyam only talk in monosyllables because their love is not the “roses and sonnets type” (14). She wants to forget Shyam as an unromantic hero in the annals of history “Shyam was History. She was going to replace him with someone who cared.” (18) She is sad because of the fact that she is the last in Shyam’s list of priorities.

The last attempt made by Mini to be one with her husband is also dashed to the ground. She feels that they might have the common interest in the metaphysical realm where they would worship only one god that would fill them with the sense of togetherness and oneness. But here also she fails to reunite with her husband spiritually “She tried to get Shyam into spirituality but he declared that Tendulkar was the only god he knew” (202).

Rustom, her colleague, inflames her professional ambitions by telling her that their profession could be more lucrative if they set up their own company in Mumbai. He says that major chunk of money out of this wedding assignment would go to their owner Mahatta in Delhi and they would get just a meagre amount out of it. They main players would just play the game and the prize would be taken by the executives who just chalk out plans sitting in the A.C. rooms. Mini ponders over this new development “What was all this talk about new companies, when all she was looking for was a new relationship” (99). But here she happens to meet a professional who likes only her deftness in her professional life. She finds herself busy and love interest is just the residuary out of the drudgery of the hectic routine. Her husband wants his wife to come back only so that she may take care of the diet of their pet ‘Polka’. Both Rustom and Shyam are poles apart. One wants to entrap her in the tinsel world of professionalism and the other one wants her fully absorbed in domestic chores and none talks of romance and love for which Mini is hankering after.

Mini is neither happy with Rustom nor with her husband Shyam because “She had wanted true love not sex for the sake of sex”. She has been able to arouse lust in Rustom but fails to arouse romance in him and hence it proves to be tragic incident in her personal life.

She feels that marriage is not the end of her life. Rather she realizes “Marriage is the end of romance.” (147) She seems to end the Indian meta-narratives of stereotypical conjugal life. Mini, the new woman challenges the idea of stable identity that is one of the hallmarks of postmodern world. Shelly Walia in her article “Enlightenment and its discontent” brings out the decentred personality of an individual “In fact, the individual has no centre as the open-minded humanist is prone to believe; the individual is mainly constituted through diverse and ever changing perceptions that she has through her life” (The Tribune: 5April, 2015)

Mini, the central character of this novel knows that after deadline is over, she would no longer be in a position to cater to her aesthetic pleasures. Her professional and physical intimacy with Rustom at Mumbai is another aspect of her personality in which she celebrates her sexual freedom and wants to drink life to the lease even if it is out of the institution

of marriage. This Indian lady crosses her feminine self to give bent to her free-style individuality even though at the end of the novel she has to come back to her old self.

She can go to any extent to get Rustom trapped. She knows that it is difficult to strike a strong personal chord with Rustom but she has only come to Mumbai to bring back romance in her life. Her "Neanderthal husband" Shyam has married only to domesticate her conjugal life. She emphatically says "She would lose so much weight, Rustom would forget all about his wife, Sandra and every other woman on the planet" (67).

Mini is the representative of those ladies who make love out of wedlock when the element of romance is no longer there in their marital life. She feels that she has the right for sexual gratification and most importantly her marital life should not be drab and cumbersome, rather it must maintain the air of romance in which the success of a happy marriage finds its solid base. She is of the strong view that everything is fair in love.

She knows that "The wedding deadline was her personal deadline too. Because once the wedding was over, she would have no reason to stay in Mumbai." (111) Her natural affinity with Rustom is more important than the mechanical intimacy with her husband Sicko Shyam. She laments "If he had been even twenty percent like Rustom, She would have been able to make do. But he was so gross, so unromantic, so cricket mad and dog crazy. How could she fulfil her romantic fantasies with a man like that?" (116) Mini feels that the conjugal life should be coloured with romantic environment so that the drudgery of everyday activities may be avoided. The writer opines "It was not about sex, it was about romance. It was about finding a soulmate, versus being stuck with a marriage partner." (123)

Mini is the prototype of a feminist mother. Tuula Gordon asserts "Thus 'feminist mothers' have been able to develop critical orientations towards societal structures and cultures, stereotypical expectations and myths of motherhood" (*Feminist Mothers*: 150). Mini and her behaviour are illustrative of this statement. She leaves the security of her home on fledgling wings and tries her best to find a footing in the competitive world of business. This attempt of hers makes her husband realize that she is not to be treated as a mere commodity.

The second coming, that is home coming starts again teaching her the lessons of domesticity even in a big city like Delhi where women are empowered to raise their voice but they cannot evade their domestic responsibilities. She realises that men and women could never actually be soul mates hence conjugal bliss is just an oxymoron in married life. She realises the truth "What Rustom was offering her was very enticing, like a sinful dessert. But marriage was like daal-roti; essential for survival." (179) In a sense, she is once again indoctrinated to take her home and husband as the microcosm. Shubha Menon's central character exists in an aporia, oscillating between the margins and the centre, seemingly belonging to neither the centre nor the margin but marginally better to challenge the patriarchal normativity. Judith Butler, in her book, *Gender Trouble* says "...the feminist discourse on cultural construction remains trapped within the unnecessary binarism of free will and determinism" (201). Mini, though professionally empowered becomes the victim of the politics of marginality.

It is Mini's competent attitude that earns her a respectable place in this highly professionalised world. She has been assigned a 'no budget' assignment. She executes her plans so dexterously and Rustom is only her second in command in this challenging enterprise. She has come here for a dual purpose that is to find a dream lover and to accomplish her task as a wedding planner. In the end her professionalism wins and her hunt for a dream lover is lost in the wilderness just because she can't leave behind the Indian values of motherhood and wifeness. She dreams of aspiring for something that

is missing in her marital life but learns the fact that values and traditions need to be preserved and maintained to impose faith into the institutions of love and marriage.

Her coming back to her traditional role of a mother and wife once again reminds her of her duty that her home and her family are bigger than anything else. Her second home coming is in a sense is her going back to the traditional values to re-establish her as a wife and mother “After the emotional roller coaster she had been on, familiarity was so comforting. There was a great satisfaction in caring for her home and husband.” (201) For Mini, sexual attraction and romance are embedded in our biology and psychology and she resumes normalcy only after fulfilling her essential needs and beyond that the unfulfilled promises made in domestic life take the centrestage “Once the sexual attraction faded, domesticity and complacency crept in” (201).

CONCLUSIONS

In a way, the second coming of Mini to domesticity/femininity can be taken as the inherent part of the backlash against feminism. According to an American journalist, Susan Faludi “the ‘back-to-the home movement’ has to be recognised as the malicious creation of the advertising industry and, in turn, ‘a recycled version of the Victorian fantasy that a new “cult of domesticity” was bringing droves of women home’ (quoted in *Postfeminism*: 57). The backlash manages to rekindle her interest in domesticity, marriage and romance in which professionalism gives way to domesticity. She, in a way, becomes the victim of the politics of disillusionment and backlash that was one of the prevailing moods surrounding the feminist ideology during the 1980s.

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